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Problems of adult basic education in the United States, symptomatic of the connection between poverty, poor education, and unemployment, have forged for the disadvantaged adult most of the links in the unbreakable chain of deprivation, frustration, and despair. The problem of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) instruction is complicated by the changing relationship between education and the abilit, to obtain employment. The treatment of the Mexican-American particularly, in trying to achieve acculturation rather than assimilation, has resulted in the wholesale dropout of two generations of students, now adults, who must be molded into functioning members of society. Compared to children, adults have a much larger native language vocabulary and have already developed abstract concepts in their first language. Also, if they are literate in their own language, they can usually make conscious and deliberate use of grammatical generalizations and apply them to new language experiences. Because of these two factors, the following features of the audiolingual method represent a conflict of learning theory and are pedagogically inappropriate for the adult education student in ESOL: (1) dialog-centered lessons; (2) inductive learning of grammatical patterns; (3) avoidance of the native language; (4) withholding the written form; and (5) natural speed of presentation. (AMM)

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ESOL AND THE ADULT LEARNER

by

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Adult basic education (ABE), one of the educational subsystems operating in any society, reflects the society and its value system. In the United States, as in other countries, adult basic education has increased during times of social crisis, because society turns to adult education for solutions to the problems of the community's (1) desire for materialistic improvement, and (2) more equitable distribution of national resources. These problems, symptomatic of the connection between poverty, poor education and unemployment, have forged for the disadvantaged adult, most of the links in the unbreakable chain of deprivation, frustration and despair. In this era of urban unrest, civil disorders, and increased militancy on the part of the approximately 10 million Spanish-speaking residents of the United States, it was to be expected that English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses would be a natural development in ABE programs.

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The problem of ESOL instruction for non-speakers of English is complicated by the changing relationship between education and the ability to obtain employment. The demands for unskilled labor have shrunk and continue to shrink with the inexorable onslaught of mechanization and cybernation. The functionally illiterate adult, often a member of some minority group, is

unemployable. Not only is the role of the ABE/ESOL teacher greater than in the past; his responsibility has increased.

The key to adult basic education is understanding adults. Research shows that while learning speed may decrease with age, learning ability does not decline.

Each adult approaching the ABE classroom is an individual human being with interests, attitudes, concepts, prejudices, and cultural and moral values developed over a lifetime of past experiences.

The majority of ABE/ESOL students have experienced failure and frustration in the classroom and in their personal lives because of the economic and social system in which they live. The treatment of the Mexican-American particularly, in attempting to achieve acculturation rather than assimilation (i.e., retain elements of the culture, including Spanish), has resulted in the wholesale dropout of two generations of students, now adults, who must be molded into functioning members of society. As in all adults, their resistance to learning is little more than a crystallization of their values and attitudes and should be taken into account in constructing the curriculum for an ABE/ESOL classroom.

Obviously, the adult brings specific learning skills to the classroom that the child does not. Research evidence regarding the relative language learning abilities of children and adults is difficult to find; and what exists offers little

support for those who maintain that children learn a new language better than adults. The disadvantages of age are compensated by two advantages. First, adults have a much larger native language vocabulary than children, particularly in expressing abstract concepts. Thus, for communication purposes, in learning English as a second language, adults need not acquire thousands of new concepts but merely the new verbal and graphic symbols representing these concepts. Second, in learning the structure of English--both in comprehending oral and written materials and in speech--if they are literate in their own language (like Spanish), they can usually make conscious and deliberate use of grammatical generalizations and can apply them to new language experiences.

Because of these two factors, certain features of the audio-lingual method represent a conflict of learning theory and are pedagogically inappropriate for the ABE student.

The rapidly growing field of Adult Basic Education has much to learn from applied disciplines, particularly as experience broadens the scope of ABE. Prior to 1925, the field of ABE suffered from a basic error in attempting to transfer research results about learning in children to adults. The sudden and large demand for ESOL classes for ABE students has caused the borrowing of unsound and inappropriate techniques from the language teaching field because of a lack of linguistic sophistication. Simultaneously, ESOL teachers in attempting to transpose these techniques have erred in their perception

of the ABE student.

An evaluation of the 1968 ABE Teacher Training Institutes reveals that the great popularity of audio-lingual techniques in ESOL/ABE teaching today is more than an over-reaction to the prescriptive grammar approach; it represents acceptance of an unfounded belief that since the audio-lingual method has been quite successful in teaching English to children, it must be the most effective way for adults to learn English. This reasoning is highly specious to educators experienced in ABE.

First, on either theoretical or research grounds, it is difficult to document experiences which indicate that children are in fact superior to adults in learning English (as a second language). Secondly, there is no valid reason to suggest that methods which yield satisfactory results with children must necessarily be appropriate for the ABE student. After all, audio-lingual techniques were designed not because they were demonstrably more effective, but because children's immaturity in the cognitive domain, narrow experiential range and lack of specific intellectual skills prevented the use of techniques that are more suitable for adults.

This article proposes to identify certain features of current ESOL methodology as areas for discussion and possible research, that are incompatible, in terms of learning theory, in dealing with the ABE student including:

- dialogue-centered lessons
- inductive learning of grammatical patterns
- avoidance of the native language
- withholding the written form
- natural speed of presentation

Dialogue-centered lessons (6-8 sentences having a central theme + 2 or 3 structures to be taught) are memorized with great difficulty by adults because:

- increased age slows learning speed
- commercially-prepared lessons are usually totally unconnected to the life style, experiences or needs of the adult and are considered irrelevant
- memorization without comprehension is alien to the mature adult

A monostructural approach (one or two sentences for memorization) is suggested. These sentences which focus on a particular structure to be taught should be derived from the experiences of the students.

Linked closely to the monostructural sentence memorization is the speed of the presentation made by the teacher. Linguists have long advocated the use of natural speed in language training. However, adult perception of sounds and speech patterns is not as acute as those of the child and the presentation of any utterance may need to be slowed to benefit the ABE learner.

Withholding the written form of English has been advocated

by ESOL specialists, to avoid the "interference" that might occur because of the disparity of the written and spoken forms of the language or from the native language. Recent research has shown the problem of interference to be greatly reduced. The research has even proven that the graphic symbol can serve as an additional stimulus in the language acquisition process by providing an associative link. The literate adult (in his native language) understands the sound-symbol relationship and transfers easily this experience to English, while the completely illiterate adult often harbors as his chief language goal the ability to read. Given the fact that literate adults, and even illiterates, have used their eyes as one of their principal learning tools, there is no reason to justify strict adherence to audio-lingual principles in withholding the written form of English.

Language drills (pattern drills) were designed to provide aural-oral practice for the student of English and a vehicle for inductively presenting a point of grammar. While this approach may be feasible with children, a mature adult, at the height of his analytical powers, feels the need for knowledge of what he is saying or practicing, and can easily transfer and generalize on the information. This is why it is suggested that any drill practice make use of the deductive powers of the student by communicating fully the meaning of the utterance.

Finally, avoidance of the native language in the ESOL/ABE classroom can quickly reach a point of diminishing returns when

translation of names for concrete items represents no great linguistic error. This last point also is important because of the attempt of the Spanish-speaking community to retain the native culture and language which have been demeaned for so many years. Simple directions, greetings or translations in the native language lend a stature otherwise lacking and can make the difference in establishing communication and rapport.

These, in summary, are a cursory treatment of some of the points that an ABE/ESOL teacher need know in terms of teaching non-English speaking disadvantaged adults. Finer distinctions and a more comprehensive program need to be provided and much more research into the nature of language learning needs to be performed. For the present, changing these basic features of the methodology into something more compatible with existing knowledge about adults can represent a tremendous stride for the ABE teacher.